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Opening Statement
Dennis Kucinich, Chairman
Domestic Policy Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform Committee
Hearing on Adequacy of USDA Oversight of Federal Slaughter Plants
April 17, 2008
2154 Rayburn HOB
1:00 P.M.

Good afternoon and welcome.

In late January, American consumers watched the Humane Society undercover video with horror. They saw cows enduring simulated drowning, being pushed by fork lifts, and dragged by chains—cows that for many of the viewers would become the protein in their families' meals. For these consumers, this was probably the first time that they were bearing witness to what happens behind slaughterhouse walls. The impact of their national gaze was tremendous.

As a result of the video's dissemination, Congress and the US Department of Agriculture ("USDA") quickly moved to address humane handling of animals and food safety issues raised by the practices at Westland/Hallmark Meat Company where the video was taped. In addition to the Senate and House Committees that conducted several hearings, the USDA oversaw the largest voluntary beef recall in U.S. history.

Rather than be repulsed by its gruesome images, the consumer public appreciated the Humane Society's video. The Humane Society reports that of the thousands of calls and emails it received regarding its undercover video, only a negligible number expressed disapproval. The rest of the communication it received expressed gratitude for helping to shed light on inhumane practices and the possible risk to food safety.

Transparency has had significant impact in other industries as well. In the fashion industry, greater attention paid to the type of fur on clothing has compelled companies like Tommy Hilfiger Group to rectify their practice of using dog fur on its apparel. Hospitals have installed videos in their effort to reduce the transmission of infections. Perhaps most telling of the value of transparency is the fact that during the recent beef recall, the owner of Westland/Hallmark

installed 17 surveillance videos throughout his plant to increase consumer confidence in his plant's practices.

In today's hearing, we will examine how the Humane Society's undercover video put into question the adequacy of the USDA's oversight of slaughter plants. It seeks to explore how transparency can enhance compliance with humane handling and food safety laws in the nation's slaughterhouses as well as the means for achieving such transparency.

In press briefings concerning the beef recall, USDA officials repeatedly affirmed that the incidents at Westland/Hallmark represent an aberration in the meat industry. Dr. Kenneth Petersen said "Food Safety Inspection Services ("FSIS") believes this to be *an isolated incident* of egregious violations to humane handling requirements and the prohibition of non-ambulatory disabled cattle from entering the food supply."

However, upon investigation, the Subcommittee discovered that USDA had conducted two audits at Westland/Hallmark in the past three years—once in December 2005 and again in May 2007. The 2005 audit cited minimal infractions. In 2007, the USDA audit noted no infractions and instead gave Westland/Hallmark a faultless report. Yet, only a few months later, a Humane Society undercover investigation revealed that the USDA's findings were a dismal reflection of the reality at Westland/Hallmark.

The contrast between the Humane Society's investigation and the USDA audits raises significant questions: Did the USDA audit consider actual practices at the plant, or the company's paperwork assertions about its practices instead? In general, does the USDA rely upon direct evidence or company assertions? Are the abuses documented by the Humane Society but missed by USDA really unique to this plant? How reliable are USDA's assurances about other plants when its auditors failed to discover the widespread violations at the Westland/Hallmark plant?

Then again, perhaps USDA knows more than it has made public? We will hear from the head of the food safety inspectors union. He himself has been a FSIS inspector for 22 and a half years, and he tells us that there is a severe shortage of inspectors which often results in inadequate or incomplete inspections. And he tells us something else too: there is suppression of inspectors who blow the whistle on unsafe practices and policies.

We will also hear from members and representatives of the meat industry, large and small, who know better than anyone else what happens behind slaughterhouse walls. We will learn about how greater transparency impacts their work—both its benefits as well as its costs. Although transparency comes in many forms including an undercover investigation like the one conducted by the Humane Society; random spot checks of plants, slaughters that are open to the public; windows that are placed in the walls of slaughterhouses, today we will spend some time exploring video surveillance and the existing technology that enables its use.

Video surveillance is already widely used in the meat industry especially by large processors. Fieldale Farms Corporation in Georgia, where 3.3 million chickens are slaughtered a week, is one such processor. It installed videos in its plant nearly five years ago as a form of "insurance" to ensure that what the inspectors couldn't see would not go unnoticed. In a conversation with Subcommittee staff, Tom Hensley, the company's CFO and executive vice president, explained that the videos increase "consumer confidence" in his operation.

Westland/Hallmark joined this group of plants in the meat industry when it installed 17 cameras in its plant. Arrowsight, which is a web-based applications services provider, installed the videos for Westland/Hallmark and will testify about its available technology today.

I look forward to hearing each of your testimonies as we explore the value of greater transparency in the meat industry.